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IDEAL

Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning



Distance education in European higher education -THE POTENTIAL-

UK case study

Distance education in European higher education – the potential UK case study

Report 3 (of 3) of the IDEAL (Impact of Distance Education on Adult Learning) project.

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Authors: Angela Owusu-Boampong, Carl Holmberg

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Lilleakerveien 23

0283 Oslo

Norway

UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning

Feldbrunnenstrasse 58

20148 Hamburg

Germany

StudyPortals B.V.

Torenallee 45 - 4.02

5617 BA Eindhoven

The Netherlands

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Authors:

Dr. John Rose-Adams

Dr. John Butcher

Table of Contents

UK national overview	7
UK universities and distance education	11
England	12
Wales	12
Scotland	13
Northern Ireland	13
Universities and adult learners	23
Barriers faced by adult HE learners	31
Enabling factors for adult learners in HE	33
Synthesis: potential for the future	35
References	36

UK national overview

Tertiary education participation

According to data derived from EUROSTAT datasets 'Tertiary students (ISCED 5-6) by field of education and sex' (educ_enrl5) and 'Population on 1 January by age and sex' (demo_pjan), the percentage of the population reaching ISCED 5A/B and beyond has remained relatively static over the last decade (2004 to 2012¹). However, there are noticeable increases over the period in the proportion of the UK population on ISCED5A programmes (from 3.45% to 3.9%, if considering the proportion of UK residents of post-compulsory school age who are able to participate in tertiary programmes) and corresponding decreases in the proportion on ISCED5B programmes (from 1.08% to 0.76%, if considering the proportion of UK residents of post-compulsory school age who are able to participate in tertiary programmes) (Table 1 and Figure 1).

The data from EUROSTAT appears to demonstrate broadly static engagement with tertiary HE across the life course. Data tables cross-tabulating tertiary participation with age are not available, so we are unable to say whether there have been increases in participation rates amongst younger adults or decreases in participation rates amongst older adults. We know from other sources that participation rates have increased amongst younger adults as a result of national policies to increase and widen participation in higher education.

¹ The period 2004-2012 is the largest range of dates in the last decade for which full data is available from EUROSTAT.

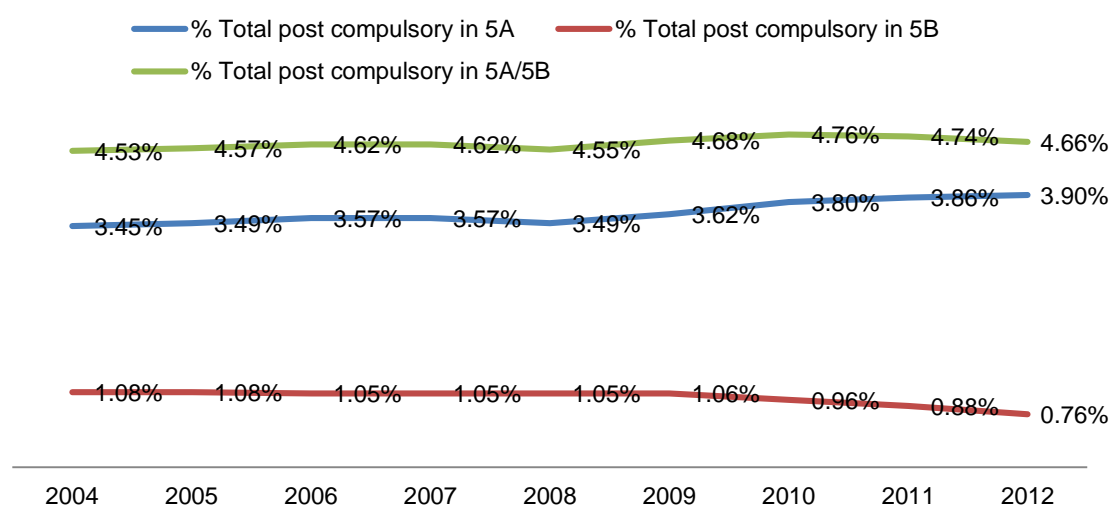
Table 1: Tertiary participation rates for ISCED 5A and 5B for UK population, based on numbers of people of post-compulsory education age and UK population as a whole, 2004-2012

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012
Level 5A	1,645,232	1,678,686	1,730,046	1,747,197	1,727,070	1,806,862	1,909,886	1,957,786	2,010,039
Level 5B	512,831	517,248	511,883	516,200	521,518	526,668	484,134	444,470	390,792
Total	2,158,063	2,195,934	2,241,929	2,263,397	2,248,588	2,333,530	2,394,020	2,402,256	2,400,831
Total post compulsory education age	47,659,096	48,073,754	48,526,299	48,982,579	49,465,640	49,892,775	50,286,472	50,704,999	
% Total post compulsory in 5A	3.45%	3.49%	3.57%	3.57%	3.49%	3.62%	3.80%	3.86%	3.90%
% Total post compulsory in 5B	1.08%	1.08%	1.05%	1.05%	1.05%	1.06%	0.96%	0.88%	0.76%
% Total post compulsory in 5A/5B	4.53%	4.57%	4.62%	4.62%	4.55%	4.68%	4.76%	4.74%	4.66%
Total UK	59,793,759	60,182,050	60,620,361	61,073,279	61,571,647	62,042,343	62,510,197	63,022,532	63,495,303
% Total UK compulsory in 5A	2.75%	2.79%	2.85%	2.86%	2.80%	2.91%	3.06%	3.11%	3.17%
% Total UK compulsory in 5B	0.86%	0.86%	0.84%	0.85%	0.85%	0.85%	0.77%	0.71%	0.62%
% Total UK compulsory in 5A/5B	3.61%	3.65%	3.70%	3.71%	3.65%	3.76%	3.83%	3.81%	3.78%

Notes:

- Level 5A denotes first stage of tertiary education: programmes that are theoretically based and designed either to prepare students for research or to give access to professions with high skills requirements. Level 5B denotes the first stage of tertiary education: programmes which are practically oriented and occupation-specific.
- The table above focuses on UK residents of post-compulsory education age, in order to align with the IDEAL project's aim to focus on 'all learners who have completed their initial education and training and are returning to education (or at least considering it), no matter what their age'.
- When considering the statistics represented above, it is important to bear in mind that the UK population is ageing: the proportion of the UK population aged 16 or over increased between 2003 and 2012 from 79.71% to 81.21%.

Figure 1: Tertiary participation rates for ISCED 5A and 5B for UK population, based on numbers of people of post-compulsory education age, 2004-2012



Adult education participation

EUROSTAT data on lifelong learning, defined as ‘all learning activities undertaken throughout life (after the end of initial education) with the aim of improving knowledge, skills and competences, within personal, civic, social, and employment-related perspectives’² and measured as ‘participation in education and training in the last 12 months versus in the last 4 weeks’, indicates a significant decline in lifelong learning participation in the UK over the period 2003-2013, in contrast with overall growth across the EU and Euro area (Figure 2). The decline in the UK has been more acute for females (Figure 3).

² http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/cache/ITY_SDDS/EN/trng_esms.htm#unit_measure1407416172749

Figure 2: Lifelong learning participation rates in the UK population compared with European Union (28 countries) and Euro area (18 countries), 2003-2013

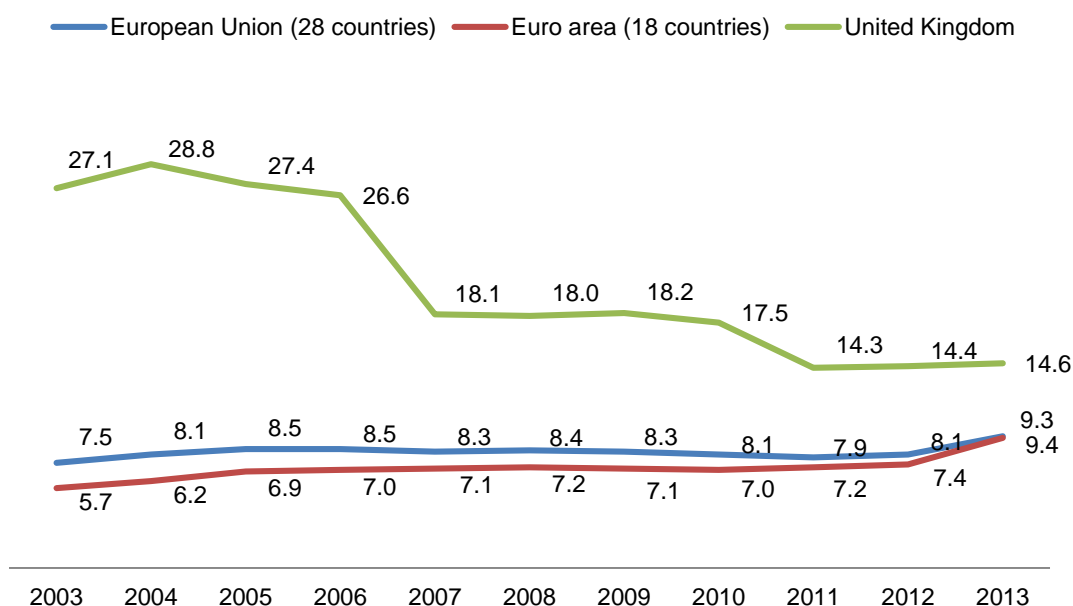
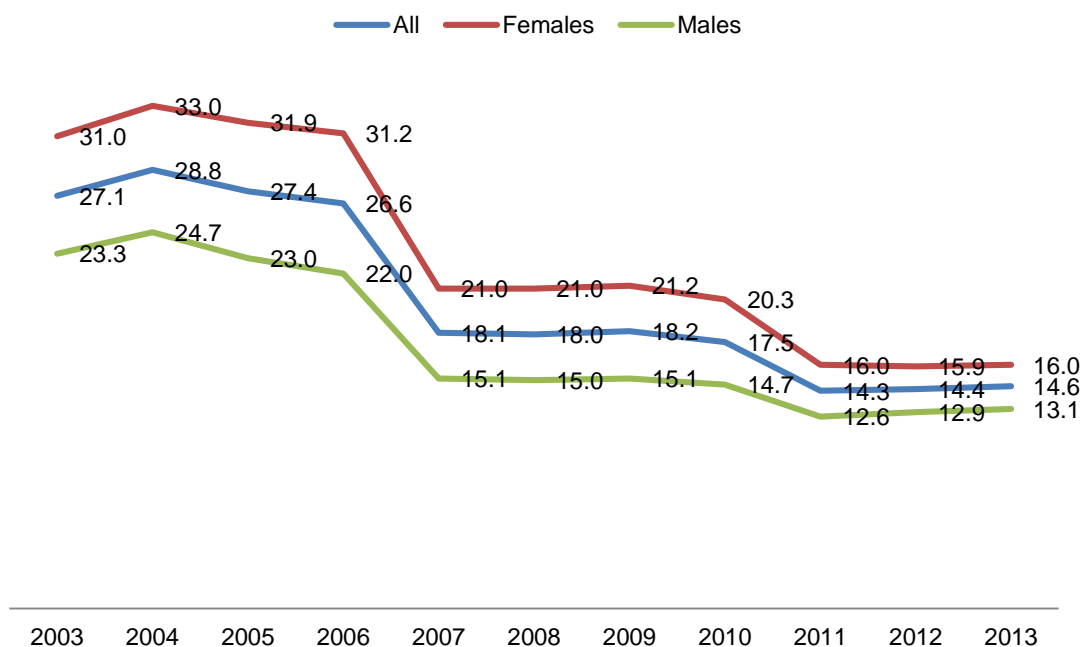


Figure 3: Lifelong learning participation rates in the UK population, male and female, 2003-2013



Source: Lifelong Learning data table (tsdsc440) derived from the Labour Force Survey.

UK universities and distance education

Regulatory frameworks

The four United Kingdom (UK) nations share a common quality assurance (QA) framework for higher education. Nevertheless, due to the three devolved national administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, some aspects of the framework are nation-specific. The UK regulatory framework is 'integrated' (Kirkpatrick, 2012), in that it makes no distinction between modes of higher education. However, there are a range of other agencies which influence the regulatory framework for distance higher education in the UK, including the British Standards Institute, the British Accreditation Council, and the Open and Distance Learning Quality Council. Universities and colleges in the UK are independent of the state and autonomous in their activities. Most receive government funding through national funding councils. A range of requirements is associated with that funding, which differs considerably in each of the four UK nations.

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) oversees academic standards in institutions. An organization independent of government, it provides guidance on and conducts reviews of HE provision. QAA areas of focus include a regular cycle of audit and review, identifying good practice, making recommendations for improvement and publishing guidelines to help institutions develop effective systems to ensure that students have high quality experiences. The QAA makes no distinction between on-campus and distance provision.

The British Accreditation Council is responsible for quality assurance in the independent further and higher education sector. This includes private colleges

providing access to higher education courses and validated HE courses in partnership with universities and awarding bodies. The British Accreditation Council works with the British Council which accredits English language centres and the Online and Distance Learning Quality Council (ODL QC), both of which predominantly focus on courses below higher education level.

England

Higher education provision in England is regulated through three main organizations: the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) and the Quality Assurance Agency. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) is the funding body for higher education in England and plays a central role in ensuring proper accountability for public funds. The Office for Fair Access (OFFA) promotes and safeguards fair access to higher education for lower income and other under-represented groups. It provides regulatory oversight by approving and monitoring 'access agreements', documents which set out how a higher education institution intends to support access to higher education for under-represented groups using the additional fee income that they choose to charge.

There has been some recent pressure for these three 'regulators', each with very different briefs, to be merged into a single higher education regulator for England (Future of Higher Education Commission, 2013) which would include within its remit monitoring of the financial health of higher education institutions.

Wales

The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) currently holds regulatory oversight by applying terms and conditions to the annual round of funding provided to each Welsh Higher Education Institution charging annual student fees above £4,000. These terms and conditions relate to the financial stability of the HEI, its efforts to widen access to under-represented groups, and the quality of its provision.

Scotland

In Scotland regulatory oversight is the responsibility of the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) which distributes funding to HEIs and Further Education Colleges (FECs) in Scotland. Responsibilities are delegated from the UK-level QAA Board to QAA Scotland. One distinguishing aspect of the Scottish system is a central focus on the Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), introduced in 2003, which places the improvement of the student experience at the forefront of quality assurance work. Enhancement-led Institutional Reviews focus on institutional management of the standards of academic awards and the quality of learning opportunities provided to students.

Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland the Quality Assurance Agency works closely with the Department for Employment and Learning and higher education institutions. Reviews of higher education are conducted by the Quality Assurance Agency, following the Institutional Review process used in England and Wales. Reviews of further education colleges which provide higher education awards are conducted through the Integrated Quality and Enhancement Review (IQER) process.

The size and shape of distance higher education in the UK

There are no explicit national policies concerning distance education in any of the separate nations of the UK. However, a range of factors and policies have a bearing on distance education. For example, recent tightening of Visa approvals processes and immigration control, which threaten international student fee income, have encouraged universities to sell more distance courses to international students to be completed in

their home nation. Some politicians in England, amidst a turbulent few years for higher education policy, have advocated distance education as a way through the difficulties (The Guardian, 2010). Distance education in the UK is included within the provision of a wide range of institutions. A small number of specific institutions cater to a very large proportion of all distance learning students, most notably the Open University UK (see Table 3 later in this report).

The generally held view is that many institutions pursue distance education for economic reasons, often exploiting the potential of academic globalization to reach international students (Rovai and Downey, 2010). Furthermore, in order to pursue such students in a competitive marketplace, many institutions draw in the services of private organizations to deliver their distance provision. In the UK, for example, the University of Liverpool works in partnership with Laureate to offer a range of online postgraduate courses in management, IT, health, law and psychology; the University of Essex works in partnership with Kaplan, offering a limited range of online undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Both target a broad market of working professionals, both UK-based and international.

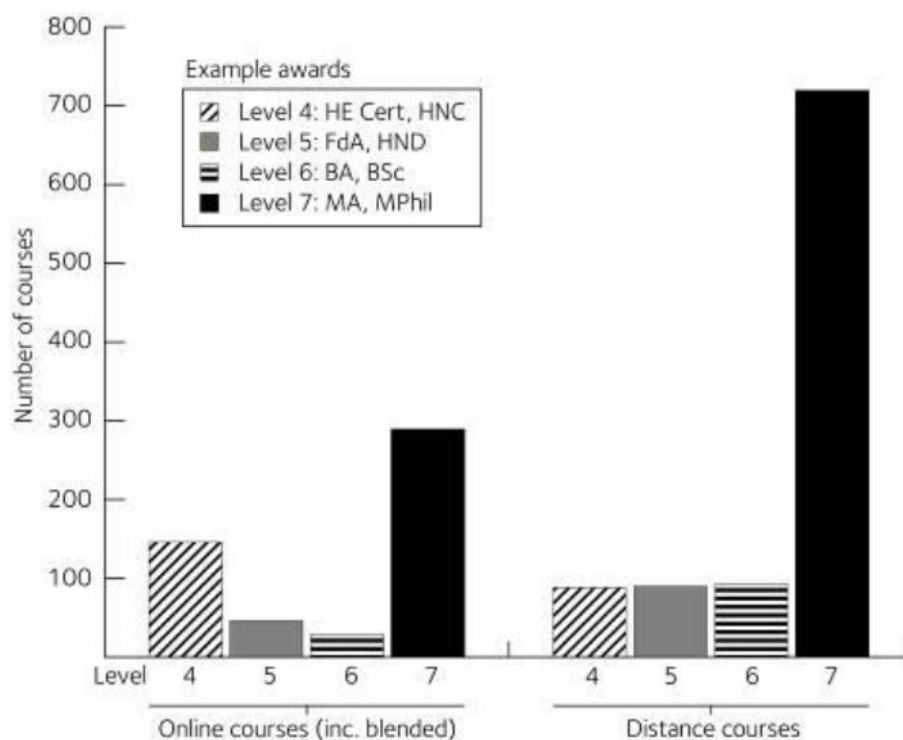
The UK higher education sector includes an increasing number of private providers. Many of these make use of online provision, although not exclusively so. One major private provider, BPP University College, which has held degree awarding powers since 2007, describes all its students as online students, although it also offers face-to-face engagement on many of its programmes.

Advances in technology in recent years have meant that for many institutions, and for the UK sector in general, the terms ‘distance learning’ and ‘online learning’ are often used interchangeably. This means that it is difficult to find robust data on numbers of distance education and online education programmes separately. The major contribution to the literature is a study conducted by the University of Oxford in 2010 (White et al., 2010). The UK Higher Education Statistics Agency³ also provides limited statistics on distance higher education provision.

³ <http://www.hesa.ac.uk/>

The majority of UK distance learning offered by HEIs is at Level 7⁴ (postgraduate level) and is offered as a form of professional development, often directed at business, law, medicine, science and education. Nevertheless, there is also significant provision at Level 4⁵, also in vocational areas (White et al., 2010) (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Number of online and distance learning courses provided directly by UK HE and FE institutions, broken down by HE academic level



Source: White et al., 2010, p.13

Research conducted in 2010 found that 113 (37%) of the UK's 308 Higher Education and Further Education institutions (excluding the Open University UK) offered distance education courses to international students (White et al., 2010). When combined with

⁴ Level 7 qualifications include sub-doctoral degrees. UK Higher Education Levels are identified in the QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Publications/Documents/Framework-Higher-Education-Qualifications-08.pdf>)

⁵ Level 4 qualifications include Higher National Certificates and Certificates of Higher Education.

the large number of courses offered by the Open University, the study identified over 2,600 HE level distance courses:

- 1,528 courses offered by 113 HE and FE institutions, of which 510 were identified as being delivered online (including blended learning)
- 952 courses offered by the Open University, of which 600 were dependent on the web and a further 95 were delivered fully online
- 175 courses offered in partnership with commercial partners (ibid., p.12)

A search in 2014 of the UK UNISTATS website⁶, which provides course details for UK undergraduate courses, returned 194 courses across a range of qualification types, of which just under half were offered by the Open University (Table 2).

Table 2: Undergraduate distance HE qualifications offered in the UK, UNISTATS

Qualification type	Enhanced first degree Enhanced first degree programmes typically include the equivalent of at least four years' full-time study (five in Scotland), of which the equivalent of at least one year is at masters level.	First degree (e.g. BA, BSc) A first degree is the standard degree for undergraduate higher education. A typical undergraduate degree in England, Wales, or Northern Ireland involves the equivalent of three years' full time study (four in Scotland).	Foundation degree (e.g. FD, FDEd) (39) A foundation degree is a qualification which combines academic study with work based learning, focusing on a particular job or profession. A foundation degree involves the equivalent of two years' full time study and allows progress onto a full first degree.	HND (7) A Higher National Diploma (HND) is a work-related course. A full-time HND generally takes two years to complete, or three to four years part-time.	Other undergraduate (36) Other undergraduate e.g. CertHE, DipHE	Total
The Open University	1	47	13	0	30	91
The rest of the sector	0	64	26	7	6	103
Total	1	111	39	7	36	194

Commentators on UK distance higher education have observed that traditional campus-based universities have predominantly extended the prevailing model of university teaching as a 'craft', with most distance education provision in these

⁶ <https://unistats.direct.gov.uk/>

universities a 'cottage industry...essentially grown up locally from within particular departments – the initiative of enterprising individuals' (Lentell, 2012, p.24). The contention is that: 'universities have largely not recognized that distance learning is a totally different pedagogy, and have not come to grips with the underpinning organizational requirements needed to implement and sustain quality distance learning' (*ibid.*)

Although technology has enhanced much of what is possible in distance and online learning, UK institutions have articulated a range of other factors which are critical for its success. These include course and programme design, management, student and tutor support, and marketing (White et al., 2010, p. 44), all of which must be delivered in a very different manner compared with campus-based higher education (Kirkup, 2014).

Costs of distance higher education

Undergraduate higher education fees are controlled differently in each of the four UK nations. In England, tuition fees are capped at £9,000 per year for a full-time course; there are no fees in Scotland for Scotland-domiciled students; and in Wales, although fees of up to £9,000 per year are chargeable, Welsh students are supported through government grants to reduce the fee cost to the student to £3,685 per year. The vast majority of full-time degree courses in England and Wales charge the maximum fee, but distance learning undergraduate tuition fees vary considerably, from less than £2,500 per year for the equivalent number of credits to a full time course, up to the maximum £9,000. Postgraduate course fees are not regulated, and some more prestigious qualifications, particularly MBAs, attract significantly higher fees.

What is known about students in distance education?

Distance education students in the UK can be separated into those who are UK-based or UK-funded (which includes Crown servants in the Services studying overseas) and wholly overseas students (which includes students registered with or studying for an award at a UK higher education institution (HEI)).

In 2012/13 there were a total of 226,420 UK based/funded and 123,635 wholly overseas students studying by distance education through UK-based HEIs. Students of the Open University UK constitute a large proportion of all undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning students in the UK. Changes to fees and funding for higher education in England which came into effect in 2012/13 saw a dramatic reduction in the numbers of part-time students. This is reflected in the Open University numbers for 2012/13 (Table 3).

Wholly overseas provision grew between 2011/12 and 2012/13, with overall growth in undergraduate and postgraduate distance learning students represented by growth in non-EU students (6.1% for undergraduate and 10.1% for postgraduate), cancelling out a contraction in EU students (Table 4).

Table 3: UK-based/funded distance learning students studying through UK-based HEIs

Level, Institution	2011/12	2012/13
Undergraduate	59,985	62,535
EU	12,645	12,130
Non-EU	47,340	50,405
Postgraduate	56,550	61,100
EU	13,410	13,130
Non-EU	43,140	47,970
Total	116,535	123,635

Note: Based on HESA Student Record - see Definitions

Table 4: Wholly overseas distance learning students studying through UK-based HEIs

Level, Institution	2011/12	2012/13
Undergraduate	59,985	62,535
EU	12,645	12,130
Non-EU	47,340	50,405
Postgraduate	56,550	61,100
EU	13,410	13,130
Non-EU	43,140	47,970
Total	116,535	123,635

Note: Based on aggregate offshore record (see definitions)

Detailed demographic data is available for the Open University UK. This is presented as an indication of the potential reach of distance education. It should be clearly noted, however, that the Open University UK has an open admissions policy for all of its undergraduate provision, unlike the wide range of other institutions offering distance education opportunities, which have a range of different admissions requirements. The Open University's student population is characterized by diversity, but shows a range of notable shifts in recent years. There is a greater proportion of younger students, with the age groups 25-29 and 30-34 expanding most rapidly as a proportion

of the total OU population (Figure 5). The proportion of students declaring a disability has increased rapidly over the last 3 years (Figure 6), as has the proportion of students with non-HE qualifications (Figure 7). In terms of gender, 6 in 10 students are female, with very little change over recent years. Ethnicity also remains relatively static, with white students representing 88% of the student population. Other ethnicities represent much smaller proportions, which have also remained largely static over the least three years.

Figure 5: Increasingly younger age profile of Open University students, UG and PG, 2011/12 to 2013/14

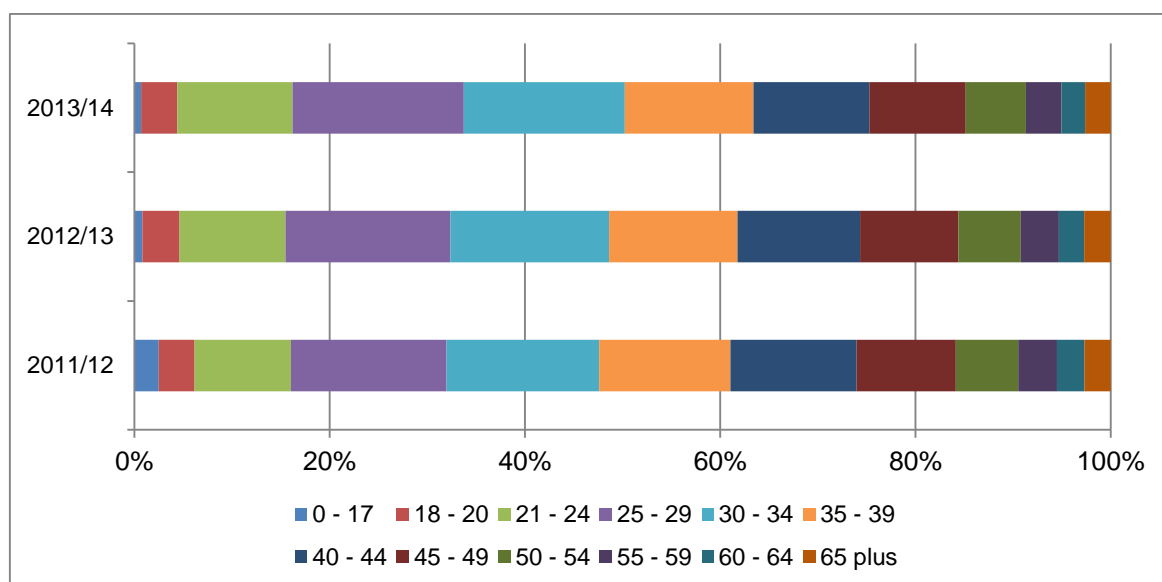


Figure 6: Increasing proportion of Open University students with a declared disability, UG and PG, 2011/12 to 2013/14

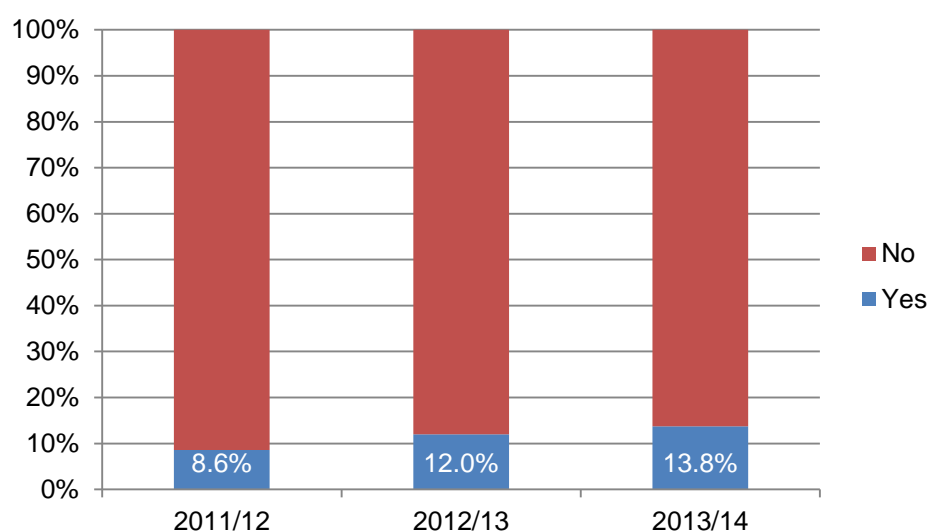
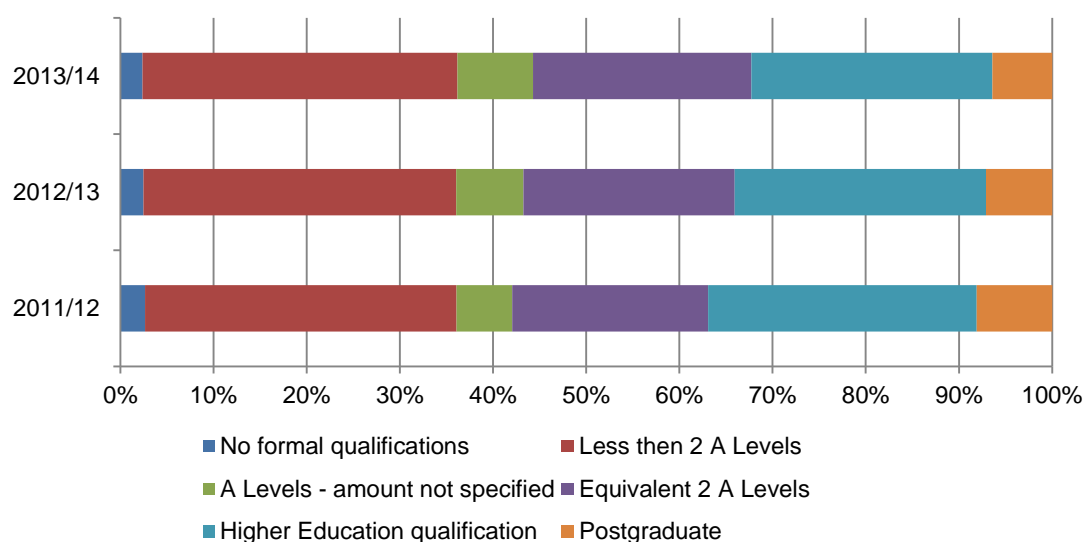


Figure 7: Increasing proportion of Open University students with A-level qualifications or lower, UG and PG, 2011/12 to 2013/14



Barriers and enablers

Advances in technology have increased the range of what is possible in distance learning, but some have suggested that this pace of technological change can be out of step with learners' skills (White et al., 2010). However, there are indications that students' familiarity with the main tools most often used by distance and online providers – virtual learning environments, blogs, wikis and forums – is increasing.

There appears to be general agreement that distance and online students have different expectations to 'traditional' campus-based students. It has been suggested that this relates to the fact that many distance learning students are working professionals and are as a rule older than campus-based students. White et al. identified that distance learning students 'generally expect to be engaged, challenged, consulted and supported in a professional manner' (2010, p. 43). Some institutions providing distance and online learning offer a range of supporting activities, including open days, online graduation services, and induction programmes. Advances in technology appear to support such developments, which aim to improve the social aspects of learning online.

Universities and adult learners

Adult learners and the strategic aims/mission of higher education

In the UK, a majority of school leavers now enter HE (almost always full-time). Strategic drivers and financial levers in HE prioritize the recruitment of bright 18-year-olds to full-time degrees, arguably to the disadvantage of adult learners seeking skills development and/or a second chance. Despite this, adult numbers in UK HE have, until the last few years, offered evidence of relatively healthy participation in relation to other European countries (Slowey and Kozina, 2012).

Historically many UK universities offered extra-mural evening study through a liberal mission to deliver part-time, non-accredited, non-vocational educational opportunities to adults. Increasingly beleaguered, this form of HE for adults has all but disappeared due to funding regimes which exclude informal and non-credit-bearing adult education, amidst political derision for so-called 'hobby classes' (Bowl, 2010).

Provision for adult part-time HE is now largely concentrated in specialist institutions (topped by the Open University at 25% via distance education, followed by Birkbeck College, University of London via accredited evening classes), or in so-called 'recruiting universities' such as Glasgow Caledonian or Edgehill, which have a mission to serve the needs of local/regional students and employers, and of the 8% studying HE in Further Education (FE). The strategic place of adult learners in UK HE is thus paradoxical in a segmented sector, with the four nations operating their own complex internal markets and funding regimes (only the Open University operates across

England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and recruits on an open access model to fulfil its social justice mission). This fragmentation results in a range of barriers to sustaining or broadening adult engagement in HE.

In spite of persistent policy rhetoric about the need to enhance adult skills, the sector clamour around widening HE participation to a greater number of adults, and statements advocating the lifelong nature of learning and its crucial availability throughout life, including part-time provision (BIS, 2011), financial provision is more likely to inhibit institutions' efforts to stimulate adult participation (EU, 2013). Currently, the critical importance of adult learners in relation to HE is negated by the disproportionate impact of national policy on part-time (and hence as a proxy, adult) HE. Because UK universities are largely autonomous, most respond to levers aimed at young students. As financial support measures are directed at full-time students, there is little incentive to offer part-time modes.

As a result of all these factors, part-time adult learners in England have been the cohort most affected by funding changes. Tuition fees not only increased dramatically from 2012 as direct funding from centrally allocated institutional teaching grants disappeared, but public funding was completely withdrawn from students embarking on equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs) and confused messages were sent regarding eligibility for financial support, uniquely impacting on part-time adult learners (Maguire, 2013). To qualify for student loans (as full-time students did), part-time study had to be at a minimum of 25% intensity of the full-time equivalent, and learners had to be enrolled on a named qualification. Moreover, from 2013, part-time students were ineligible for maintenance loans or grants. Simultaneously, the economic downturn led to an increase in both un(der)employment and fear thereof. Employers were less inclined to fund part-time HE or provide time off for exams, and government-imposed austerity measures led to reduced public sector employment, the area most attractive to adult learners. Inadvertently, therefore, adult learners are playing a decreasing role in the mission of UK HE.

Numbers of adult learners

The dominant application route into HE in the UK is the Universities Central Admissions System (UCAS). Across the 162 HEIs in the UK, total numbers for **full-time** undergraduate (UG) degrees showed some decline following the effective tripling of HE tuition fees in England in 2012. However, numbers have remained relatively stable since then (378,000 entrants in England in 2013/14, 27,000 more than in the previous year). Some subjects reflect this recent increase (Sciences, including Engineering and Computing) while others (Languages, Architecture) have continued to decline. On the UCAS website, it is noted that around one third of all undergraduates are **mature** students (defined as adults aged 21 or over at the commencement of studies). This is broken down into:

- 40% aged 21-24
- 20% aged 25-29
- 40% aged 30+

Two thirds of these entrants have had no prior experience of HE. The proportion of full-time adult HE students from low participation neighbourhoods is dropping, suggesting that efforts to widen adult participation have stalled. If non-degree qualifications are included (certificates, diplomas, institutional credit), the proportion of adult learner enrolment rises to 52%.

Crucially, 92% of part-time HE entrants in the UK in 2012/13 were aged 21 or over. In order to understand the UK's somewhat ambivalent attitude to adult HE students, it is thus vital to take into account that the numbers of **part-time** UGs almost halved between 2010 and 2014 (48% drop from 320,000 to under 200,000 (HEFCE, 2014), especially on courses that are not first degrees (numbers on foundation degrees, certificates and diplomas (38%) and institutional credit (35%) all dropped significantly). There may be significant social justice issues here, since a greater proportion of females (60%) study part-time.

In the same period, despite different funding regimes, part-time adult learner numbers decreased by 34% in Scotland and by 22% in Wales. Numbers have risen slightly in Northern Ireland, but essentially only because the original baseline was so low.

Success rates/drop out

Across UK UG HE, adult learners studying full-time tend to drop out in slightly greater proportions than young students (10% vs. 6%), which is attributable to the additional responsibilities (life pressures) that adult learners carry while studying. Of the 2011/12 cohort of mature access students, 10% withdrew from their UG degree programmes – the same proportion as for adult students with traditional entry qualifications.

The more significant issue is withdrawal from part-time HE courses. This stands at 35%, a figure aligned with the experience of adults studying courses with the Open University. Supporting persistence for adult learners studying part-time is therefore of crucial importance, given that adult learners who see their degree through to the end perform at least as well as younger students and enjoy a significant ‘graduate premium’ in terms of subsequent career earnings, according to Open University evidence.

Adult learner motivations for returning to study

UK adult learners in HE include those embarking on a ‘second chance’, those from groups traditionally under-represented in HE, those returning after a break, and late-life ‘leisure’ learners. Research in Wales with part-time adult students (Butcher and Rose-Adams, in press) confirms what policy statements and previous academic studies have claimed: that adult learner motivation for embarking on HE study is often closely related to employability aspirations – whether to gain a job, change to a better job, make a ‘late’ career change or improve career prospects in a present job. For

adults, however, all this is nuanced through personal values and life experiences – and therefore not aligned with HE policy on graduate outcomes for 21-year-olds.

For adults coping with a disability, returning to study can be about an aspiration to ‘give something back’ and help others as they have been helped. Another little-studied employability motivation was also uncovered by Butcher and Rose-Adams’ study: for those adult students living in rural isolation, often with extensive caring responsibilities, returning to study was about gaining confidence and the organizational skills to become self-employed, or to develop resilience and persistence as part of a drive for self-improvement and enhanced personal agency. For older learners (50+), personal interest and/or enjoyment became more significant learning motivations (UUK, 2010).

Courses and programmes of study

The most popular HE subject choices for adults are:

- Subjects allied to medicine
- Business
- Education

The contrast with young full-time students is striking: 28% of adult UGs study subjects closely linked to public sector employment (subjects allied to medicine and education) compared to only 12% of young students.

Higher Apprenticeships have been advocated as a contemporary solution for adult learners. However, for at least fifty years, reports have bemoaned the relative absence of higher level technical/vocational skills provision below degree level in HE in England (Association of Colleges, 2014), blaming the gravitational pull towards the academic in HE, as manifest in a system dominated by three-year residential degrees. This contributes to a decline in the recruitment of part-time adult students and a shortage of advanced technical skills. A key criticism is that HE qualifications are not fit for purpose:

they are too generic, with insufficient skills elements and limited employer involvement. If Higher Apprenticeships are a solution, support will be needed in the HE in FE sector, which enrolls 130,000 HE students, about 10% of the total, of whom half study part-time and 60,000 study for professional certificates and diplomas.

Access routes

Of the adult students who embarked on full-time UG study commencing in 2012/13 (74,700), 20% progressed from Access to Higher Education Diploma courses (offered in England and Wales), or in smaller numbers from the Scottish Wider Access Programme or the Access Certificate in Foundation Studies in Northern Ireland. 49% of these students were over 25 years of age. Access to HE Diploma students were more likely than other students to live in areas with the lowest quintile of HE participation (fewer than one in six).

Access Diplomas are usually 60-credit Level 3 full-time courses in specific, often vocational subjects, intended to prepare learners for degree level study. Aimed at adult students who left school without the qualifications to enter HE (QAA, 2014), they are offered by almost 300 FE Colleges and a handful of other education providers (including HEIs and adult education centres). As such, they represent a major alternative route to admission to HE.

Health-related subjects allied to medicine and nursing were the most popular (9,795 accepted onto HE courses). In a handful of universities over 6% of the total UG intake progressed from Access. Part-time and distance learning modes were also available but attracted relatively few students. The gender split on Access Diplomas in England and Wales was 73% female: 27% male.

Some adult students without traditional entry requirements progress to HE from preparatory foundation courses (an extra year within their UG degree), especially in the Sciences. Others are able to gain direct access to the later years of degree programmes on the basis of prior sub-degree vocational qualifications. A notable

difference between the UK nations is the significance of FE Colleges in Scotland, which provide a significant component of adult HE.

Recognition of prior learning

More usually known in the UK as the Accreditation of (Prior) Experiential Learning (A(P)EL), the tension between adult experience and learning on one hand and academic knowledge on the other has been played out in UK HE policy discourse for the past 35 years. A(P)EL remains a contested educational practice in the UK, 'over-theorised and under-practiced' (Scott, 2010, p. 29), on the margins of academic provision, perceived as 'difficult' for HEIs to implement and time-consuming for adult learners themselves (Peters, 2006).

This ongoing policy/practice conundrum is illustrated by the aspirations for proponents of A(P)EL since the 1980s, who hoped that policy espousal of Lifelong Learning would result in the removal of barriers for non-traditional learners in work settings, and that more accessible credit accumulation would result. Optimists saw A(P)EL as providing alternative, emancipatory routes to HE for adult learners, utilizing a developmental approach for individuals via reflection on 'authentic' prior learning to achieve social justice aims (Evans, 2006). More often, however, A(P)EL has morphed into credit exchange, with performance auditing and achievement mapping being used to credentialize experiential learning and thus to create a further hurdle for adult learners to overcome.

It is ironic that, despite policies advocating Lifelong Learning and Widening Participation coinciding with a shift to a more learner-centred pedagogy in UK HE, the extension of A(P)EL has not been achieved. Even a well-received policy aimed at widening participation, like the introduction of Foundation Degrees (FDs)⁷ in 2000, has

⁷ A qualification aligned with the first two years of a three-year undergraduate degree which emphasised work-based learning and A(P)EL and theoretically offered adult students access to HE without formal qualifications and accelerated progression.

struggled to deliver major change (only 3.2% of all UK HE qualifications awarded in 2012/13 were FDs).

In the UK, assessment remains the dominant tool in the portfolio approach, driven by HE expectations regarding compliance with 'academic' writing. Prior learning thus has to be expressed in established, familiar forms, as learning outcomes designed by the university, including a mastery of theory. The power of formal expectations regarding the award of credit in UK HE remains strong, and there is little evidence of A(P)EL acting as a driver of social inclusion.

A(P)EL has gained a foothold in the development of portfolio assessment of competence in corporate Continuing Professional Development (CPD), but this has primarily addressed a narrow aspect of training for academic advancement. Lecturers appear to have limited knowledge of A(P)EL, misunderstanding its potentially developmental purpose in HE (Dismore et al., 2011, p. 329). Despite the challenge of work-based learning, many still perceive higher learning as essentially academic.

Barriers faced by adult HE learners

Part-time mature UGs are a poorly understood cohort in the UK, invisible in national policy but more heterogeneous than young full-time students (UUK, 2013). Despite making up well over a quarter of the UK UG population, policy treats them as an ‘add-on’ rather than as intrinsic to the HE mission. It is striking that the older an adult student is, the more likely they are to study part-time (75% of over 25s study part-time).

Of those studying part-time in England, 45% are parents with dependent children and two thirds have caring responsibilities. 53% of adult part-time learners study HE ‘other than’ first degrees. 82% of part-time mature students combine work with study and under a third receive financial support to study from their employer. Most therefore face daunting time pressures to juggle study around other commitments, whether work, family or both – more so than younger full-time students. Even if personally motivated, adults often need to address a lack of self-confidence as well as a lack of time. Fewer employers support staff development for the 80% of part-time students in employment, and adults find it increasingly difficult to take breaks for study. With the sharply increased cost, do higher fees offer a return on investment?

Fee increases from 2012 disproportionately affected adult learners, especially those from the most debt-averse of cohorts in HE: the lowest social classes, single parent families, and black and minority ethnic groups, who were more sensitive to fees rising than young full-time students.

Although compared with most European countries the UK has high participation rates in education and training and fairly high levels of flexibility in formal education (Schuller and Watson, 2009), there are a number of systematic blocks to a longer term strategy for lifelong learning. The current system does not recognize increasingly diverse transitions into and from employment, and is itself complex and demotivating for many

adult learners. In England at least, the system is over-centralized, and is characterized by the unacceptable accumulation of educational inequalities over the life course.

Barriers include social class, which is closely linked to participation in adult learning (the higher your socio-economic position, the more likely you are to take part in learning); employment (even a low ranking job gives you a better chance of learning than being out of the labour market entirely); age (the younger you are, the more likely you are to participate); and disability (a major barrier to participation). It can also be demotivating if older students' life experiences are not recognized within HE: studies of learners over 50 suggest attitudinal barriers (both by learners and providers) can be as significant as personal factors like health and income, or institutional discouragement (UUK, 2010).

Enabling factors for adult learners in HE

In an Institute for Employment study (Pollard et al., 2008), 30% of the working adults surveyed would consider applying to university at some point in the future, but they want the flexibility to study vocational subjects in their local area, in the evenings, at weekends or part-time. There has been a plethora of recent literature (Barnett, 2014; McLinden, 2013; Maguire, 2013) concerning flexible approaches to HE in the UK (blurring the full-time/part-time divide through disruptions to pace, place and mode of learning). There is certainly a pressing need for greater flexibility regarding assessment deadlines and access to facilities for part-time adult learners.

However, while acknowledging the challenges faced by part-time learners in HE, this literature tends to underplay the relationship between what Barnett terms 'systematic flexibility' and 'pedagogical flexibility' and the specific needs of adult learners. As such, flexibilization has impacted more on traditional face-to-face HE in the UK, prompting the adoption of more blended approaches in the context of marketization, a clamour around students-as-consumers, and the potential of digital technologies. Contemporary thinking regarding flexibility in the adult sector is only at the stage of advocating investigation into ways to extend support for part-time learners (Barnett, 2014). There is little evidence of pedagogies which address the specific needs of part-time learners and apply theory to practice. Given that the provision of part-time HE has been in dramatic decline in the UK (especially England) for the last four years, it is difficult to see how the kind of flexibility envisaged here will bring back adult learners who cannot study full-time and are disproportionately affected by fee rises.

In contrast, organizations such as the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) have campaigned for the right to learn throughout life as a human right (Schuller and Watson, 2009), and for adults returning to organized learning to be treated positively as part of a national strategy. Their recommendations include basing adult learning policy on four key stages in the life course (up to 25, 25-50, 50-75, 75+)

and the transitions between them, with resources rebalanced (a little) to the latter two stages. Funding should support people to combine study with other activities and should not discriminate against part-time provision.

Belatedly perhaps, the UK is starting to acknowledge a skills challenge. Employers are beginning to recognize that they need to make better use of current employees' skills. This will require universities and employers to work in partnership to develop more diverse vocational routes into HE.

Synthesis: potential for the future

Although the absence of credit places them outside this report, could free Massive Open Online courses (MOOCs), Badged Open Courses (BOCs) and Open Educational Resources (OERs) address the needs of adults in HE through informal learning? This would potentially bring together modes of learning familiar from distance education and an innovative re-engagement with adults seeking HE learning. The evidence is not yet clear, but poor retention and cohorts consisting of existing graduates suggest that MOOCs may not widen participation, and that OERs in their present forms may not start UK adults on a journey to formal HE learning.

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